

# Barber school has a unique student body

Stateville inmates learn a trade

Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2014 By BRIAN STANLEY -

CREST HILL – Bobby Mattison's Barber Shop is down at the end of "State and Madison."

"Streets" that were given that name decades ago for the volume of people walking back and forth.

With 14 stations there isn't much of a wait, even though almost all appointments are scheduled in advance. There's a poster on the office window displaying pictures of hairstyles 1 to 24.

Anthony Thomas cuts at Chair #1 where Tuesday morning's conversation included some debate over the attractiveness of famous actresses and a joke about a talented frog.

But like every barber shop, the focus was on sports.

"How you think the Cubs or White Sox are going to do?" Thomas asked his first customer.

"How long are you in here until?" he was asked in response.

"2030," the man convicted of attempted murder answered while holding a pair of scissors.

"Maybe they'll win by then," his client said. Oh, I hope not," Thomas laughed before he went back to trimming.

Thomas and 14 other inmates of Stateville Correctional Center are learning to cut hair from Mattison. While the prison has had a barber shop for years, felons were prohibited from receiving a barber's license until laws were changed last year.

After 1,500 hours in the program, inmates will be qualified to take the state board exam for barbers upon their release.

"When someone goes back into society with a job skill, there's less chance of recidivism when they have a way to earn a living," Illinois Department of Corrections spokesman Tom Shaer said. "It's a benefit to them and a benefit to the taxpayers."

Work assignments are still desired by inmates, Mattison said. To apply for the barber program, prisoners must have a diploma or GED, score well on reading and math tests and interview with Mattison.

"Some guys just want to get out of their cell, but these guys want to learn how to do something productive, something respectable," Mattison said. Violent and non-violent offenders are accepted.

Prisoners get one or two haircuts a month, which are free. The barbers are not tipped, but "I'll get you next time" is a common joke around the shop.

The equipment inventory is monitored by guards. Prison barbers are not allowed razors, but have mockups for instructive purposes.

"There's five chapters to get through before you even touch the clippers," Mattison said. "You need to learn the history of barbering, sanitation, property of skin."

Thomas feels the program has given him self-esteem that's as important as the skills he's learned.

"Coming from an impoverished neighborhood [Chicago's Bronzeville] I didn't see a lot of men working while I was growing up," he said. "When you have customers who want to have you cut their hair again. What you're doing is important. There's a pride in what you do."

Besides learning about hair, Thomas has learned "people are funny about their hair," but when they become comfortable with a barber or stylist they view them as a friend or counselor.

Mattison instructs his students to introduce themselves to and learn the name of anyone who sits in their chair.

"We have a 99 percent completion rate and learning about customer service is as important as learning about hair when they're ready to work [after being released]," Mattison said.

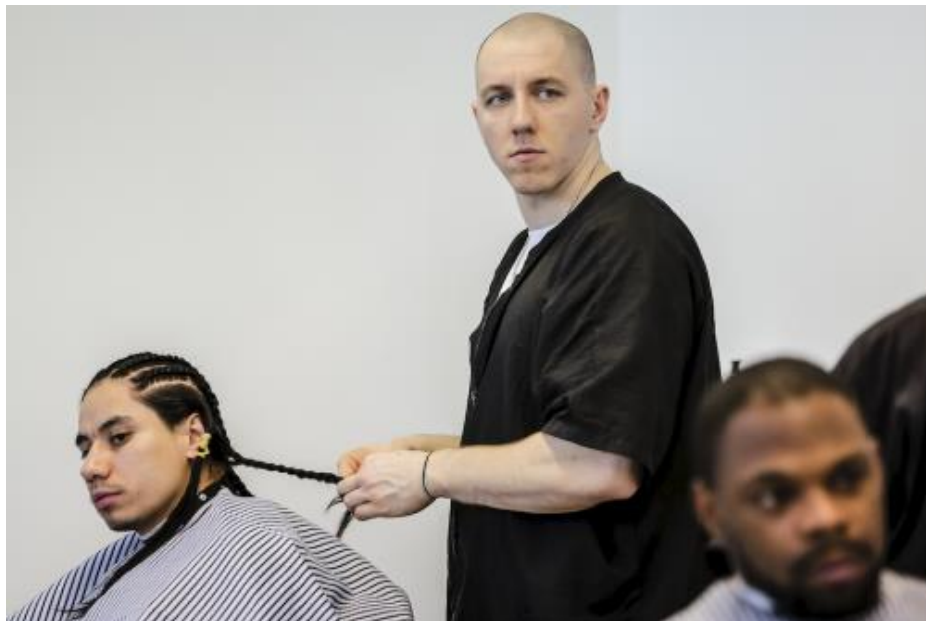


Willie Walker prepares to cut the hair of Nathaniel Tucker Tuesday in the barber school at Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill. The barber training program has been part of the prison for more than 30 years but since November 2013, inmates who complete the program are legible to be licensed by the State of Illinois.

(Photo by Lathan Goumas)



Inmates talk Tuesday while participating in the barber school program at Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill. The barber training program has been part of the prison for more than 30 years but since November 2013, inmates who complete the program are legible to be licensed by the State of Illinois.  
(Photo by Lathan Goumas)



Joshua Minniti braids the hair of Ignacio Jacobo while working in the barber school at Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill. The barber training program has been part of the prison for more than 30 years but since November 2013, inmates who complete the program are legible to be licensed by the State of Illinois.  
(Photo by Lathan Goumas)



Barber Instructor Bobby Mattison watches as Willie Walker prepares to cut the hair of Nathaniel Tucker Tuesday at Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill. The barber training program has been part of the prison for more than 30 years but since November 2013, inmates who complete the program are legible to be licensed by the State of Illinois.

(Photo by Lathan Goumas)